



Preventing (and Handling) Frozen Water Pipes

Cold spells can have unfortunate consequences when it comes to home plumbing. The three main causes of frozen pipes are quick drops in temperature, poor insulation and thermostats set too low. Homeowners should be alert to the danger of freezing pipes whenever outside temperatures reach 20°F or lower. Most of us take a few measures in the fall to prepare our homes for winter, like disconnecting outside water hoses. But what should we do now that really cold temperatures are here?

When the Mercury Drops

- A trickle of hot and cold water may keep pipes from freezing. Let warm water drip overnight, preferably from a faucet on an outside wall. Opening a faucet relieves excessive pressure that builds between the faucet and ice blockage when freezing occurs. If there is no excessive water pressure, there will be no bursting pipe, even if the water inside the pipe freezes. If the dripping stops, leave the faucet(s) open, since a pipe may have frozen and will still need pressure relief.
- Keep thermostats set at the same temperature both day and night. Many people have a habit of turning down the heat when they sleep, but further drops in the temperature – more common overnight – can freeze pipes.
- Open cabinet doors to allow heat to get to uninsulated pipes under sinks and appliances near exterior walls.

Going on a Trip?

Traveling to warmer climes may be good for the soul, but don't forget to think about your pipes before you leave:

- Set the thermostat no lower than 55°F. A lower temperature may reduce the heating bill, but could lead to a disaster if extreme cold causes your pipes to freeze and burst. Ask a friend or neighbor to check on your house daily to make sure it's warm enough to prevent freezing. Or...
- Drain the system by shutting off the main valve and turning on every water fixture (both hot and cold) until water stops running. It's not necessary to leave the fixtures open, since the system is filled mostly with air at that point and not subject to freezing. When your return, turn on the main valve and let each fixture run until the pipes are full again. Be aware that if you have a fire protection sprinkler system in your house, it may deactivate when you shut off the water.

What if your pipes freeze despite your best efforts?

- Don't panic -- Just because they're frozen doesn't mean they have burst.
- If you turn on your faucets and nothing comes out, leave the faucets open and call a plumber.
- You may be able to thaw a pipe with the warm air from a hair dryer. Start by warming the pipe as close to the faucet as possible, working toward the coldest section of pipe.
- Never try to thaw a pipe with a torch or other open flame because it could be a fire hazard. Water damage is preferable to burning down your house!
- Never use electrical appliances in areas of standing water. You could be electrocuted.
- Be sure you know where and how to turn off your water supply in case your pipes ever burst; call a plumber if needed.